interview: Steve Russell

FLEET SERVICES SUPERINTENDENT *City of Keene, NH*

BY SETH SKYDEL | CONTRIBUTING EDITOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL PLOTCZYK, AMETHYST IMAGES

Located in southwestern New Hampshire, near the state's border with neighboring Vermont and Massachusetts, the City of Keene serves as the county seat of Cheshire County. Home to about 22,500 people, the 37 square-mile municipality has been recognized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as one of "America's Dozen Distinctive Destinations" due to its well-managed growth, commitment to historic preservation, attractive architecture, cultural diversity, activities for families with children and economic base of locally-owned small businesses.

Supporting the lifestyle that has made Keene notable is a centralized operation that has direct purchasing and maintenance responsibility for the city's Police, Fire, Public Works, Water and Sewer, Parks, Recreation, Cemetery and Airport fleets. In its Mission Statement, the City of Keene fleet is tasked with providing users with vehicles and equipment that are suitable:

- To the function users need to perform
- Available to users when they are needed
- Reliable when they are in use
- Safe to operate and safely operated
- Economical to own, operate and maintain
- Specified, operated, and maintained in an environmentally responsible manner.

Charged with seeing that the mission of the City of Keene fleet is accomplished is Steve Russell. The city's Fleet Superintendent for the past ten years, Russell oversees the entire operation. Before joining the city fleet he worked for 11 years managing corporate fleets, including eight years at an insurance company and three years for an auto glass supplier. Recently, Russell discussed the City of Keene fleet operation with *Utility & Telecom Fleets*:

What does the City of Keene's fleet include in terms of vehicles and equipment?

Like most municipal operations, Keene has a very diverse fleet. Vehicles in our operation include sedans, Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptors, light-duty trucks used by the planning department and medium-duty trucks used by the highway department. There are also 48,000-lb GVWR plow trucks equipped with multi-lift hoists and dump bodies, ground speed stainless steel salters, snow bodies, snowplows and wings. This enables us to plow snow and salt roads and then be available to pick up the snow at the conclusion of a storm without having

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CITY OF KEENE TRUCK SPECIFICATIONS

MODEL: 48,000 lb GVWR conventional 4x2 truck

ENGINE: International DT466E, 230 HP @ 2300/2400 RPM, 660 lb/ft torque @1400 RPM; Caterpillar 3126b, 230 HP @ 2,200 RPM, 660 lb/ft @ 2400 RPM

TRANSMISSION: Allison MD-3060P automatic, five speed

FRONT AXLE & SUSPENSION: 18,000-lb capacity, semi–elliptic springs

REAR AXLE: 30,000-lb capacity, single reduction

BRAKES: full air cam, automatic front and rear slack adjusters, dust shields, spring actuated, air operated parking brakes

STEERING: hydraulic power

TIRES: 315/80R22.5

FUEL/WATER SEPARATOR: Caterpillar

BATTERIES: (2) minimum 90 ampere hour, 1,800 CCA

ALTERNATOR: 115-amp

BLOCK HEATER: 120-volt

SEATS: driver and passenger air ride

FUEL TANK: 50 gallon, driver's side

to change trucks. The city has 11 trucks used to manage snowstorms and without the multi-lifts we would need at least ten more trucks to haul snow and support construction work by the water and sewer departments.

Are you operating any alternative fuel powered vehicles?

The entire diesel fleet is powered with biodiesel. We use B20, a blend of 20 percent ASTM canola oil and 80 percent petroleum diesel fuel. The use of biodiesel started for the city fleet five years ago with a small grant from the State of New Hampshire Clean Cities organization to pay the increased cost of the B20 blend. Every diesel engine in our operation has run exclusively on it since then without any issues. There have not been any problems with cold weather flow or injectors, and only a few fuel filters have been replaced on older trucks due to the cleaning properties of the fuel.

Have there been any benefits of using biodiesel?

One factor is better air quality in the shop. Our technicians kept talking about how much better the air in the shop is since we started using this alternative fuel. To find out why, we went to Keene State College, which has a very strong and nationally recognized risk management curriculum, including worker safety. One of the professors in that department received a grant from EPA to study air quality as it relates to diesel fuel and agreed to evaluate biodiesel and compare air quality of B20 to regular diesel fuel. The study looked at levels of invisible particulate matter, which is known to cause asthma and in some cases cancer, and found it was reduced by close to 80 percent with biodiesel.

In terms of makes and specifications, is the fleet standardized? Why is this important?

The majority of the light and medium-duty fleet consists of Ford models and heavy-duty equipment is supplied by International and Freightliner. As a small fleet in a small geographic area it is usually quite a few years between replacements so standardization of parts, vendors and mechanic training is very important. It is also beneficial when warranty issues arise as it helps to have some leverage with manufacturers.

What trade cycles are in place and how are they determined?

We have a ten-year replacement plan in place. Every piece of equipment has a replacement date and we look closely at lifecycle costs before making replacement decisions.

Do you evaluate new systems and components for suppliers? How important are supplier relationships to the success of your operation?

Due to the size of our fleet we tend to be below the radar for evaluating new systems and components, although we'd be more than willing serve as a test site.

Fleet managers know that we cannot be experts in everything so vendors that know their products are worth their weight in gold. In times of need, a phone call to a vendor that you have a good and fair working relationship with can mean the difference between getting something in a day versus a week.

What factors influence your purchasing and specification decisions?

In municipal fleets, the lowest bid ultimately drives the final decision so before we write specifications we spend most of our time looking at the details of the equipment and past service records, and talking to other users about their experience.

With our ten-year equipment replacement plan, we moved the replacement request for dollars out of the operating budget and into the capital dollar request process. That has been very effective in eliminating the "kick the tires syndrome" that happens when managers put the replacement request in the operating budget. In addition we have a citywide vehicle committee that reviews all equipment replacements each year. Department heads have to justify replacement needs and at the same time we review maintenance records and condition criteria.

Please describe your maintenance program, shops and staff.

We have a Shop Manager who is responsible for scheduling and mechanic assignments.

We provide maintenance, minor repairs, welding and machine shop service. The City of Keene's maintenance program can be described as preventive. The goal is to reduce downtime on all city equipment, provide same day service for police and fire units and keep plow trucks going during storms. This can only be accomplished by spending time on a regular basis on every piece of equipment in the city fleet. We also have a training budget and work hard to evaluate needs and match those with technician training.

Are you using a computerized management information system?

We use CFA (Computerized Fleet

Analysis) software to manage equipment details, inventory information and controls, and work order, purchasing, fuel tracking and reporting systems. It is a very effective tool.

Another system that is utilized for two tasks is the Windows Outlook Calendar. One is scheduling repairs on vehicles so all users can view them. That way, when we need to work on a specific piece of equipment the user knows we need it for service. The other task is scheduling pool cars. All users can go online and reserve a car for city business, eliminating the need for someone on staff to handle that task.

Are you outsourcing any services?

The Keene fleet outsources transmission and large truck and equipment tire work. Because of the replacement schedule that is in place we have virtually eliminated the need for engine overhauls and other major repairs. In a municipal fleet, the maintenance staff must be able to work on a very diverse group of vehicles and equipment so we can usually handle almost anything in-house.

How are parts managed in your operation?

We have a storekeeper who maintains our parts inventory with the CFA fleet software. Our goal is to be able to get the right part at the right time. In a small community the challenge is to not load up the parts room with items you think you might need and may never use because vendors are 50 to 100 miles away. Unfortunately, we sometimes have to use overnight shipping but by developing a strong list of vendors the need to keep many parts on the shelf has been eliminated.

How do you dispense and purchase fuel?

Biodiesel is dispensed with an OPW chip key system from a 20,000-gallon underground tank. The facility that we moved into three years ago does not have an unleaded tank so we went out to bid for a fleet fueling card and the winner was the CITGO fleet fueling system. It has been a very effective way for the city to get fuel without having to maintain a central fueling system.

What tire programs do you have in place?

We purchase tires using a state contract. It is very effective in getting needed tires at a good price without going through the local bid process. We do not keep a large inventory on hand due to the problem with shelf life. In the past we thought tires would last forever and buying them in bulk would save a lot of money, but that's not the case. By developing a good relationship with a tire supplier there is no need for a large inventory.

Do you participate in associations and if so how is that beneficial?

I am a member of the National Association of Fleet Administrators. I first joined NAFA when I was a corporate fleet manager. The association has been very good for becoming a stronger fleet manager over the years and it has a strong network that helps me get my job done. ■